

Royal Botanic Gardens Kew

Inspiring futures

Ian Willey



Tell us about your job

UK National Tree Seed Fieldwork Officer at the Millennium Seed Bank (MSB).

Why is science important in your career?

I think science helps us interpret the world and provides the evidence needed to address many of the issues facing humanity. It is then over to other parts of society to get this message across and enact the necessary change which is equally important.

What is your average work day like?

I research target species to collect seed from using mapping tools and botanical records. As we are interested in genetic diversity we only want seeds from plants that are naturally seeded in the environment. I cross-reference different sources to make sure this is the case.

Fieldwork involves leading teams to find target species, assessing seed quality and collecting seed to transport back to the MSB.

Identification and verification of plants. Hopefully the correct species is identified in the field but closer inspection is necessary back at Kew, using detailed keys.

Did you go to university? If so, what did you study? If not, what did you do after leaving school?

I went to The University of Manchester which was one of the best experiences of my life! I had a great time there, learning a few things on the way. I studied Environmental Science and went on to do a more specialist Masters in Pollution and Environmental Control.

What do you most enjoy about your job?

I enjoy getting to see UK in all its glory, talking to landowners and reserve managers, hearing their stories about the woodland they love. It's wonderful to see how many people care about the natural environment which is vital if we are to conserve the small pockets of ancient woodland we still have here in the UK.

What sort of personality traits do you have that help you in your career?

I would say that I'm always up for a challenge and will often put myself out of my comfort zone in work and out of work. I also think not giving up was important in finding my career, it took a few years working in pubs and doing volunteer work before I was able to get a job aligned with my interests.

Be flexible, be adventurous and enjoy what you do.

What helped you get your role at Kew?

After university I took a few jobs not related to environmental work but kept on doing voluntary positions that were more specific to my interests. This experience together with my degree helped me get my first job working for Kew in the labs at the MSB.

What advice would you give to someone considering a career like yours?

Again, keep plugging away and if you want something you can get it. Don't just follow the path you think you should follow, think about what will make you happy.

What do you want people to know about your work?

The UK National Tree Seed Project, is a force for good. This is important to me and gives me a sense of purpose.

Some people have clear career paths early on but if you don't, it's ok; your inspiration may come later on.

Take pride in your work, aim to improve and think about how best you can use your skills.

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